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ABSTRACT

Economic and social factors that affect young people's sense of obligation for community service are identified, along with the influence schools and government can exert on students. The recent management of the American political economy has given young people concern for their own survival. College students who will graduate during the 1980s will not have access to the economic advantages afforded their parents. Some evidence indicates that college students today are more oriented toward self-interest and their own financial well-being than previous generations. Students may be responding to the messages they receive from political trends, including the reduction of support for education and the facts that scholarship aid to students is means-tested but Social Security and Medicare are not. However, despite these discouragements, students still have a sense of social responsibility. At Stanford University, a public service center coordinates internship and fellowship programs, a public policy forum, and career advising. A consortium of institutions, the Project for Public Community Service, helps promote service to others and develops networks to match student interns and volunteers to local and regional needs. At the national level, policy reforms need to recognize the importance of social investment in the young. (SW)

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"CAN WE HELP?"
PUBLIC SERVICE AND THE YOUNG

Donald Kennedy
President
Stanford University

Ladies and Gentlemen:

It is a truism to say that our future is in the hands of our young people. But no truism was ever truer; and no group in this country knows its truth better than we, right here in this room -- we who are privileged to have an observation point past which the best young men and women in America move, pausing long enough to allow us to watch them grow and change and begin to form the foundations of their lives and of our nation's.

The marchers in that line comprise the most important resource our society has. If we succeed with them, our national life will continue to grow and improve -- and they will, incidentally, take good care of us! But if we fail, they will settle a hopeless burden on their successors, and plunge us into a cycle of deepening intergenerational debt.

Which prospect is likelier? And on whom does it depend? Is it we or they who have primary responsibility for the outcome? The answer to that, obviously, is "both." How can anyone deny that the older generation -- of parents, of educators, of voters -- must provide the right starting conditions, superintend the launch, set the initial course?

Yet there are signs that a troublesome mythology is arising -- one that discounts the prospects for today's younger generation in advance, as though it had some inborn error of social metabolism. There is a lesion, it is asserted, in their sense of social responsibility. Young people are less concerned about the public interest and the welfare of their communities, and more interested in their own economic security. There are countless examples of this myth; it was already well established in 1980, when Landon Jones, in a book about the baby boom entitled "Great Expectations" wrote of the new college generation, "What we see now is a generation coming to college that is as different from the baby boom as night from day. Today's students are passive, conformists, materialistic." Since then, the notion has only become more firmly implanted.

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I think this is a classic case of blaming the victim. And that is a bad habit, for two reasons. First, self-delusion is never a good idea; more important, like any other prophecy, it may become self-fulfilling. In the hope of helping to avert that fate, I want to spend the next few minutes talking about the kinds of economic and social prospects we have given our young people over the past decade or so, and about the signals we have sent them concerning their obligations to community. After that, I hope to address the future, with some suggestions about how we can change both the signals we are sending and the prospects we are creating.

First let me talk about economic prospects. The generation of students that will graduate from college in the decade of the 1980s is unique in a number of respects. Caught, as it were, between the baby-boomers and the baby-boomers' children, it forms a part of the first American generation whose members will lack access to the great American dream of generational improvement. These young men and women, by and large, will not have access to the economic advantages afforded their parents. Moving one's young family into a house at a fixed, low-interest mortgage; experiencing extraordinary appreciation on land and other tangible assets; being able to increase the probability that one's own children will receive higher education; having access to full employer-financed health benefits; being comfortable about one's retirement protection at age 40; all these opportunities were commonly available to the college graduates of our generation. But they will be available only for the very most fortunate in this one.

That is discouraging enough; but our national vital statistics tell an even more depressing story. Perhaps the most gripping one is that between 1960 and 1982, the suicide rate for 15-year-old Americans more than doubled, in a period during which suicide rates for the elderly were dropping significantly.

And that change was a response to real economic difficulties. Between 1970 and 1982, the proportion of Americans over 65 who live in poverty was reduced from 24% to 15%. But in that same period, the proportion of those under 14 living at poverty levels or below grew from 16% to 23%. Thus the positions of elderly and young Americans with respect to the most critical indicator of economic danger in this country were exactly reversed in just a dozen years.

The "juvenilization of poverty" is just as real as the "feminization of poverty." We have dramatically altered the way in which we allocate social resources to different portions of the life cycle in this country. The result is that proportionately, the elderly are doing better, and the young much

worse. In 1970, for example, about equal shares of the gross national product were spent on health and on education. A dozen years later, expenditures for health had grown half again as large as those for education. That, in itself, indicates a major proportional shift of resources from young to old, because of course health-care expenditures occur primarily at the end of life and educational expenditures mainly at the beginning. But even within the health sector, the new commitments have been heavily concentrated on such diseases of age as cancer, heart disease and stroke. The result is that from 1968 to 1980, mortality rates for Americans between the ages of 70 and 80 were reduced about four times as much as mortality rates for the age group between 10 and 20.

For a more extended analysis of these and other data, I hope you will consult the work of Samuel Preston, a demographer at the University of Pennsylvania who has written thoughtfully on this very important phenomenon. This brief summary makes the point that we are in the midst of a sea-change in the political economy of the United States, one that is putting young people at an unparalleled relative disadvantage. It would be astonishing if they did not sense that change, and react to it. The evidence strongly suggests that they do.

Each year, as you know, the American Council on Education and UCLA conduct a massive and carefully constructed survey of college freshmen. This invaluable data base, put together by Dr. Alexander Astin and his colleagues, gives us a revealing glimpse of changes in attitudes among young people. Since 1972, there has been a conspicuous increase in the positive responses students give to values that we might call "self-interested": being well-off financially, having administrative responsibility for others, obtaining recognition. The value item with the largest growth between 1972 and 1983 was "being very well off financially," which increased from 40% to 70%. Over the same period of time, there were declines in various values that can be thought of as community-directed: promoting racial understanding, keeping up with political affairs, cleaning up the environment, and the like.

Are these indicators of an innate selfishness? Have we somehow contrived, without knowing it, to spoil a whole generation of American youngsters? Or are we simply seeing some predictable responses to the messages we have been sending?

Let us examine the content of the messages. There is, first of all, the powerful economic signal I have just described. It is not merely that economic opportunity has been narrowed, although that is surely true. It is that, in addition, we have pursued a whole array of policies that contribute to a loss of

equity between the generations. Surely that must be obvious to the loser generation. The Gramm-Rudman-Hollings legislation, which at Stanford we have taken to calling "Grambo," requires the reduction of "controllable" federal expenditures -- but the government will not consider a tax increase, control military spending, or modify entitlement programs. Scholarship aid for undergraduates is slashed, and subjected to ever-more stringent tests of financial need; but Social Security and Medicare are not means-tested at all. Graduate fellowships aren't indexed to the cost of living, whereas social security payments to the retired are. How can we possibly believe that these messages aren't read and understood? How dumb do we think they are?

Thus I think that our management of the American political economy has given our young people ample reason for heightened concern about their own survival. That alone might be enough to account for a certain preoccupation with personal security: if no one else seems inclined to help you, you'd better lay plans to help yourself.

We might have reduced that reaction somewhat had we accompanied our economic policies with some high-minded rhetoric about public responsibility -- preaching to them, as it were, while we lifted their wallets. But alas, we didn't even do that. Instead, there has been a steady barrage of criticism against the institutions that most centrally embody our ideas of public service and duty to community.

In one hit-and-run report on American education after another, the schools have been attacked as ineffective, and teachers for the most part as incompetent. In general, these reports have offered little by way of thoughtful remedy; and the government entities involved have been conspicuously reluctant about making any long-term commitments to improve the situation. We are left to conclude that if only there were better teachers, and more of them, and if they only offered more days of class per year and more class hours per day, the schools would do their job. I hope very much that the resulting attention of Americans to the schools will ultimately serve to bring about reform, but I worry that in the interim, both teachers and would-be teachers have become too demoralized to give the effort the leadership it needs.

And more generally, we have seen an extraordinary wave of national hostility toward government and government insitutions. That phenomenon began in earnest in the middle 1970s. Since then, candidates for major national office have vied with one another to see who can deride the civil service in the most colorful way. I speak, I must confess, with particular fervor on this subject. When I arrived to head the Food and Drug

Administration early in 1977, the regulatory agencies of government had received the brunt of this new attention. After inspecting the devastation that had been wreaked on my new organization's employees, I quickly concluded that the restoration of self-respect was my primary task.

The climate has not improved much since then; bureaucracy-bashing is still a prominent element in much of national campaign rhetoric. Somehow, it does not strike most people as inconsistent when a candidate for Presidency of the United States heaps scorn on the very apparatus over which -- he devoutely hopes -- the voters will soon grant him control. It reminds one of the small boy who goes off to summer camp, and writes home: "Dear Mom and Dad: The food here is poison -- and there's so little!"

And in the classroom and in the library, today's undergraduates are likely to encounter a high degree of skepticism about the efficacy of government interventions into human welfare. The intellectual equivalent of bureaucracy-bashing along the campaign trail is the neo-conservative insistence that the great social programs of the 1960s failed, and that similar interventions are similarly doomed. They don't bother to add that this conclusion is reached by the same social sciences, using the same methods, that created just the opposite orthodoxy a couple of decades ago!

Well, that is probably about enough of that. My point is straightforward enough; given the character of the messages we have been sending, why should we be surprised that college students are indicating a high level of concern for their own economic features? Do we really have a right to complain when they appear focused on self-interest? Even if they had good things to say about public service, why would they assume that their elders would want to hear them?

Well, there is some surprising good news. Despite all of these discouragements, my experience with the undergraduates of the 1980s tells me that there is a large reservoir of social responsibility there. What it needs is some productive outlets, and some enthusiastic encouragement and approval, to counterbalance the messages I have just been talking about. At Stanford and at many other colleges and universities represented in this room, campus initiatives to promote and encourage public service have been producing dramatic results -- results that offer the promise of changing the depressing self-fulfilling prophesies we have been hearing about this generation from its elders.

Why have we been "pushing" public service? There are at least two good reasons. The first is that we are, after all, teachers, and that a central fact of life in this society is the symmetry between individual rights and personal freedoms on the one hand, and public obligation and responsibility on the other. John Gardner put it well at the first Stanford conference called "You Can Make a Difference." He said, with wonderful succinctness, this:

> "Freedom and responsiblity. Liberty and duty. That's the deal."

And he went on:

> "In the stable periods of history, meaning was supplied in the context of a coherent community and traditionally prescribed patterns of culture. On being born into the society you were heir to a whole warehouse full of meanings. Today you can't count on any such patrimony. You have to build meaning into your life, and you build it through your commitments -- whether to your religion, to an ethical order as you conceive it, to your life's work, to loved ones, to your fellow humans. People run around searching for identity, but it isn't handed out free any more -- not in this transient rootless pluralistic society. Your identity is what you've committed yourself to."

I think the notion of the social contract is being rediscovered: by sociologists (see the fascinating book "Habits of the Heart"), and even by politicians (note the thoughtful discussions of generational equity by, among others, Senators Moynihan and Durenberger.) The young people in our institutions are especially fortunate, and they thus have an extra obligation as well as the extra opportunity to contribute to the public interest.

There is a second, equally compelling reason. Given all we have said to them, it is important now for us to display some confidence in the rightness of their impulses. When you ask people to do things, you show your regard for them. "We need you" also says: "we trust you, and respect you." Thus the call to public service is not simply an appeal to help society, not a request to exercise some form of noblesse oblige. It is an invitation to become a stakeholder in this great joint venture of ours.

What have we been doing to help? At Stanford, for example, the public service initiative began four years ago. My associate Catherine Milton undertook an assessment of opportunities for government internships, volunteering, and the like; she found that there were many, distributed around the campus, but that

clear points of access were difficult to find and the level of coordination was disappointing. While her assessment was under way, a number of students joined in the effort, and their enthusiasm briskly transformed analysis into action. Part way through that first year, they sponsored a conference on Entrepreneurism in the Public Sector, and it drew large and enthusiastic audiences. Subsequently Stanford has established a Public Service Center; it includes a Volunteer Network, a program for summer and academic-year internships, supported summer and post-graduate fellowship programs, both of which received significant financial support, a public policy forum, career advising for students interested in the public and independent sector, and an annual conference that grew out of the first one.

A number of indicators suggest that we have succeeded in raising students' awareness of their obligation to help. The rate of volunteering for the Peace Corps and Volunteers in Asia has nearly tripled over the past two years. In each of the last half-dozen quarters, the Student Volunteer Network has produced over 500 Stanford students to work on various community projects on Saturdays. The Stanford-in-Government Program had 120 undergraduates in Washington last summer, and a smaller number in Sacramento; the 14 available special summer fellowships drew over 70 applications. I hasten to add that this record could be matched or exceeded at a number of institutions; the great thing about it is that it is a generalized phenomenon, not limited to any particular campus setting.

Perhaps the best evidence for this is the Project for Public Community Service, a consortium now consisting of over 100 institutions, and growing daily. This project is housed at Brown University and operated by the Education Commisssion of the States. Frank Newman, who is well known to many of you, has been an invaluable godfather in getting this movement established and then disseminated; Melissa Auchard, recently a Student Body President at Stanford, is its staff officer in Providence. My colleagues Howard Swearer at Brown and Father Tim Healy at Georgetown, worked with me and many other university presidents to help get it started. I suspect we will soon be talking of it as the "campus compact." Its aims are simple; to reestablish students' commitment to service for others, to help develop policies that academic leaders and educational administrators and legislators can employ to make the climate more hospitable to such service, and to develop networks that will match students seeking opportunities to local and regional needs.

If these local and national efforts succeed, then the universities will have taken leadership in a movement of extraordinary value. What we seek, and what we seem to be accomplishing, is the legitimization of some powerful but repressed impulses on the part of the best young men and women in this country. To realize and to reward the value of these

impulses, and to establish status for the resulting action, will be a significant accomplishment.

But it will not do the whole job. The restoration of enthusiasm and the reinstatement of public regard can make a difference, but unless the social and economic parts of the equation change, that difference may not be enough. That takes me back to where I started: to the need for a set of national policy reforms that recognize the crucial importance of social investment in the young. That is why my title -- "Can We Help" -- was meant to suggest something we ought to be saying to them, and not the other way around.

To begin on the expenditure side of the budget, what we have is a Draconian solution: a deficit-reducing, balanced-budget rule is created and the legislature has to abide by it come what may. In my judgment, any solution of that kind must have its most profound impact on those forms of current spending that have some degree of future time preference. There is no way in which we can fix the budgetary bottom line for this government without reducing the very kinds of year-by-year expenditures that have some chance of making a difference in terms of future investment. You know that financial aid to college students, research programs, and various kinds of expenditures for education and science facilities will be among the first to go in any system that is sensitive to the annual bottom line, and in which other kinds of policy modifications are not made.

Now let me turn to the revenue side. We are supposed to be in a period of tax reform and simplification. What bounced around in the House Ways and Means Committee and finally emerged last year is not reform any longer; it first became simplification without reform, and then neither of the above. The present version, it seems to me, manages to discourage philanthropy, discourage the use of private funds for public purposes, and withdraws important tax incentives for investment -- all without doing the one thing that a tax proposal these days really ought to do, which is to improve revenue. We badly need to reform the tax structure, but I think we need to do so in a way that weighs edcuation and other future investments much more heavily. If you agree, tell it before you leave town to your favorite Senator -- especially your favorite member of the Finance Committee!

Most important of all, the Gramm-Rudman solution and the tax reform proposals, taken together, embody a strange paradox, by refusing to accept a world in which we tax ourselves in order to invest in our children's future. In short, these schemes give no opportunity at all for revenue improvement. What we really ought to be asking ourselves in this country, I think, is this: How

Can a society that is as productive, successful, and ambitious as ours tax itself so little? Are we really not willing to give up some things for the present in order to improve our future?

What particular policy remedies would I suggest? First, we need to question our military expenditures more critically. Second, we must explore more ways to tax consumption and to spare personal investment. Third, when we reduce government expenditures we ought to target those that have relatively lower investment value. These include some sacred cows, but we need to take them on. In particular, I hope we can stop the indexing of Social Security payments -- a practice that arose as a consequence of Congressional accident anyway, and that most thoughtful welfare analysts believe was a mistake. I also believe we should consider applying means tests to <u>every</u> program of that sort; we simply cannot afford a situation in which every program you can think of -- from farm subsidies through Medicare to Social Security -- supports citizens without any regard to their ability to support themselves. Finally, we must support our investments in human capital by increasing expenditures for schools and for education, and also by improving our national capital infrastructure for innovation through continuing and enlarging the incentives for investment in research.

We have been described as a society hopelessly hooked on the present, and relatively indifferent to the future -- as a nation of "wanters", rather than "waiters." In the test of a society's time preference, education is a key element: it is the ultimate test by which we measure our sense of responsibility for our collective future. How education will look in the 21st Century depends on what we are willing to give up for it in what remains of the 20th. On the basis of our present distaste for self-denial its quality will be nothing to make us proud; but we can change that. My main point, and I end with it, is this: the decisions we are making right now will determine a future that will be beyond the capacity of our sons, or our daughters, or our students, to retrieve and reshape.

Thank you very much.